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Hope Builders Connects Employers to Job-Ready Talent

BY KIM STEMPER
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Business executives that work with Hope Builders include (L to R): Steve Rodermund, business development, Rosendin Electric; Michael Konetzke, Meta Operations Lead, DPR Construction; Carlos Gonzalez, division president, Clark Construction

When Aylen Alquisiras walked into Hope Builders, the young mother of two was ready to embrace a new beginning with the help of the Santa Ana-based nonprofit, which trains young adults for careers in construction, healthcare and other in-demand fields through its workforce development programs.

Today, the first-generation immigrant is a medical assistant at Hoag Hospital, a mentor to other medical assistants and on her way to nursing school.

“To me, Hope Builders means opportunities and second chances,” she told the Business Journal.

Her journey reflects hundreds of similar stories of how Hope Builders’ innovative social enterprise is strengthening Orange County’s workforce one job, one match and one transformed life at a time.

The Santa Ana-based organization is the No. 88-ranked nonprofit in Orange County with revenue of \$6.2 million as of June 30, down 14% from the same period a year ago.

Two Entities, One Mission

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange founded Hope Builders in 1995 in response to increasing gang violence, high youth unemployment, low high school graduation rates and rising teen pregnancy rates in central Orange County.

It prepares young adults ages 18 to 28 with the technical, personal and professional skills employers need. The nonprofit offers three free, stipend-supported programs: child development, medical assisting and construction. Each is designed to prepare participants for in-demand careers.

Its model is simple yet powerful.

“Recruit young people who lack on-ramps to careers, provide mentorship to keep on track with their lives, teach them the skills employers need and link them to employment,” Christa Sheehan, deputy director of Hope Builders, told the Business Journal. “The result is a workforce-ready strategy that offers measurable ROI for businesses.”

In child development, trainees learn to support children in schools, clinics and after-school programs. Medical assisting students train to work with doctors and nurses, with pathways to specialized roles and licensure. Construction trainees gain hands-on skills useful across trades such as carpentry, electrical work, plumbing and painting.

Hope Builders partners with institutions including Santa Ana College, American Red Cross, OSHA and Santiago Canyon College to ensure high-quality, hands-on instruction.

In June, Hope Builders received an undisclosed multi-year grant from the Sun Family Foundation—a transformative gift that will help young OC adults gain critical skills to build brighter futures for themselves and their families, the nonprofit said at the time.

“The Sun Family Foundation’s support is helping us build a stronger, more inclusive workforce in Orange County,” Shawna Smith, executive director of Hope Builders, said in a statement. “Their partnership enables us to provide the mentorship, life skills, and job skills training our young adults need to succeed in today’s economy.”

A Social Enterprise Solution

In response to the growing need for middle-skills jobs facing Orange County employers, Hope Builders launched Hope Builders Career Connections (HBCC) in 2018. Although separate entities, the two operate hand in hand.

HBCC connects Hope Builders graduates directly to jobs in construction, healthcare, behavioral health and child development. As a staffing agency, HBCC places candidates in direct-hire or temp-to-hire roles and remains engaged long after placement. Employers pay a fee for HBCC’s services.

“Hope Builders Career Connections generates revenue that Hope Builders wouldn’t otherwise necessarily have,” said Sheehan. “The revenue generated by HBCC is reinvested in Hope Builders programs.”

HBCC rigorously vets candidates, including background checks and drug screenings, to ensure they are job-ready. Employers say HBCC provides more than qualified candidates; it offers a model that supports retention. Graduates arrive with soft skills and technical training.

HBCC conducts monthly check-ins with both employees and employers for the first six months to make sure the transition is going smoothly.

“When a skills gap emerges, Hope Builders can adapt its curriculum right away,” Sheehan said. One construction employer, she recalled, noted that two new hires needed stronger math skills. Hope Builders added additional instruction the following week.

Measurable Results

HBCC’s high-touch model delivers strong outcomes. About 77% of Hope Builders graduates matched through HBCC secure a job immediately upon graduation, and 80% remain employed six months later. Seventy percent of employers return for additional talent. With 92% of trainees being bilingual, graduates bring added value to healthcare, behavioral health and customer-facing roles.

Orange County companies, including Pan-Pacific Mechanical, Providence St. Jude Medical Center, St. Joseph Hospital, 24HRC, Control Air Enterprises, Hoag Hospital, Clark Construction and United Behavioral Consultants (UBC), have connected with HBCC to help meet their workforce needs.

Employers See the Difference

Marielena Benton, a medical administrator at Western Orthopedic, recently hired a female graduate.

“She is proactive, a multitasker, respectful and she learns quickly,” Benton said. “And HBCC followed up to make sure everything is going well.”

UBC has hired six employees through HBCC, all of whom are prepared to certify as Registered Behavioral Therapists.

“Hiring through HBCC is more personal,” said Brittany Brink, co-founder, UBC. “Their candidates come in with solid training and the ability to empathize with families, which is incredibly important.”

Clark Construction has hired several graduates, many advancing to journeyman or foreman roles with Clark Construction Group subcontractors.

“They have a strong work ethic,” said Carlos Gonzalez, division president of Clark Construction. “We’ve found that those we’ve hired have been more reliable, dependable, honest, harder working and better equipped for the basics of construction jobs. They’re humble and willing to take on any task.”

Gonzalez, a longtime supporter of Hope Builders and its current board chair, added, “Hope Builders’ biggest, most important impact is transforming lives. The ripple effect transforms families, transforms streets, transforms neighborhoods and, over time, transforms entire communities.”

Changing the Trajectory for Young Adults

For many young adults, Hope Builders and HBCC don’t just provide jobs; they change the direction of their lives.

Eliseo Reyna, now working with special needs children, once believed his future was limited to part-time fast-food work. With Hope Builders’ training and HBCC’s support, he found both direction and purpose.

“Hope Builders gave me, well, hope,” he said. “There aren’t enough words in the English language to describe how much they have helped me.”

With a younger brother who has special needs, his new career path felt especially meaningful. Today, he plans to become a social worker—something he once thought impossible.

Antheny Velasquez came to Hope Builders after years of bouncing between warehouse and fast-food jobs. HBCC helped prepare him for his interview with the construction company 24HRC, built his resume and supported him after hiring.

“The name Hope Builders Career Connection fits well,” he said. “It really did give me hope and confidence. Now I see a future ahead in my career.”